

The memory of a Best Friend lives Forever

by Cherish Baker

Danielle Morris (not her real name) and I lived to dance when we were in grade school. We perfected dances at my home in the huge upper room with wall size mirrors that made it look like a professional studio.

Even at seven years old, I danced until I was tired. The "Tootsie roll" was popular and I did it until I got it right. I knew all the latest dance moves and I would laugh while my long ponytails swayed along with me.

I was a free spirit focused on the fun in life. Danielle with her medium length, jet black hair and somewhat heavy set figure was always the type to teach me a routine that she created.

She was a serious and demanding mentor with a high-pitched Minnie Mouse voice that sometimes annoyed me, but I let her talk to avoid hurting her feelings. I knew when we were younger she would be a leader someday.

My favorite routine was to a major R&B '90s favorite sung by Monica and Brandy, "The Boy is Mine." The '90s songs had the best beats and dances with an energy that felt as if the artist were talking to you.

The routine to Monica and Brandy's song required a dance move in which we looked like we were playing a hand clap game. It took us forever to figure it out, but we were amazed at how cool it looked.

We moved freely in the studio mirror reflection, doing flips and cartwheels, and anything to make our routine unique. Our mothers were amazed that we could assemble a routine at such young ages.

My mom wanted to enroll me in dance classes, but I knew that Danielle's family couldn't afford it and

her mother would not let her join a class.

Ms. Morris said no to everything, fearing that Danielle would get pregnant just as she did at a young age. I never understood why Danielle couldn't participate in positive things but she could stay out all night and even have boys over her house after school.

It was obvious that Danielle's relationship with her mother was not good. I had noticed a huge blue and brown bruise on her back as I gave her a temporary tattoo from the quarter machines at the local Jewel-Osco store.

I pretended that I didn't see the bruise and Danielle had all but forgotten it was there when she lifted her shirt for the tattoo. That's when I assumed the abuse happened all the time and Danielle had become somewhat immuned to what people would think of the horrible bruises.

My homelife, on the other hand, was a haven of childhood bliss. My mother and I had a close relationship. Each day, she made my lunch for school and put a note in the bag to say that she loved me and to have a wonderful day.

She cooked me a stick-to-your-ribs oatmeal breakfast with maple flavored sausages every morning, and drilled ladylike behavior into my head.

"Only a few ladies are left; be one of them," she would say.

I never told Mom about Danielle's bruises or how Ms. Morris would yank her around sometimes for fear that I never could see or visit Danielle again. I kept it secret for so long because I didn't want to be separated from my only friend for something

beyond her control.

Danielle never really had stories to tell me about her mother. If I asked, she put her head down or change the subject.

She mentioned her grandmother a lot and how delicious her grandma's food was. I've only tasted her peach cobbler with creamy vanilla ice cream because I usually don't usually eat anyone else's soul food but my mother's and granny's. I was surprised that Danielle's grandma's cobbler tasted exactly the same.

The peaches melted in my mouth and the flavor had just the right amount of cinnamon. Danielle ate very fast, so I told her to savor her food and enjoy every bite.

Danielle's speed-eating habits continued when we went shopping. After my Mom dropped us off at Ford City mall one day when we were around twelve, Danielle and I took as many samples as we could from the Fannie May store.

She shoved the chocolates in her mouth and even tried to take mine. I usually let her have them because the only samples I enjoyed were the trinidads, my absolute favorite with the crunchy outside texture and soft rich chocolate inside.

Once we entered junior high, Danielle moved out of her mother's home and seemed much happier. I stopped asking about her problems at home because I knew they were somewhat of a buzz kill.

On the days when she was quiet and kept to herself, I knew that she had fought with her mother. All mothers and daughters argue over small things, but over time Danielle had come to school with finger impressions on her arms and neck, and swollen eyes.

She was drastically losing weight because she wouldn't eat in case she did something wrong at the dinner table that would get a physical reprimand.

Danielle came to school with scratches on her neck and busted knuckles. She needed to do something to take her mind off her home life. I needed something to help me stop wondering about what was happen-

ing.

Both our older sisters had performed with dancing teams at numerous basketball games, football half time shows at home and in other states. My sister Shaun attended Clark Atlanta University, a historically black college (HBCU) with a band that won the drum line nine years in a row.

HBCUs take their band and dance teams very seriously. Practices are brutal and sleep is forbidden, all in the name of a good show and a good reputation.

Some people attended the games or band battles just to see the dancing.

Watching Shaun dance was like seeing a double mirror. Her moves were flawless. Danielle's sister Dania attended Hampton University in Virginia where her long black ponytail inspired teammates to wear the same hairstyle. The team looked so much more uniform that way.

Dania swung her ponytail and led the team with seductive yet tasteful dance moves. Danielle spoke little of Dania unless we were talking about dancing.

My grandmother had been a flagelette at Fisk University so it only seemed right to follow in her footsteps. She still can twirl a baton in her right hand, spin it around her back and twirl it in her left hand as if she did it yesterday. After so

many years of observing, we got out chance to join the flag team ourselves.

We joined the flag team in high school as a new chapter in our lives. Our mothers were not strict, just safe. We were always allowed to go places; they just wanted to know the whens and wheres. At fifteen, those little things are sometimes forgotten.

Having fun tends to blind the fact that you say you will be back when you said you would. I've always been respectful toward my mother because I figured she had done so much for me that all I had to do was be a good daughter.

After Danielle was kicked out of her house at two o'clock in the morning one day, she asked to stay



Danielle (left) and Cherish (right) are adorned for the Valentine's Day dance in junior high school.

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with me. I asked no questions because she sounded desperate and lost.

“Cherish, I need to come over, I know it’s late but I need somewhere to go, I’m scared,” she said hurriedly. I couldn’t imagine getting kicked out. My Mom has gotten mad to the point where she has wanted to kick me out of the house but I know that she would be the first person calling me five minutes after she made me leave.

we wanted to make our mark on the flag team as soon as possible, to make our skills from previous years of dancing pay off.

Coach Relf wanted every high kick to make our knees touch our mouths and the way the flags turned in the wind suddenly became important. Tryouts were somewhat intimidating, considering there were girls who looked down on us for being freshmen.

We were in group number five, a group



Danielle (left) and Cherish (right) were members of the Girl Scouts.

Danielle did things with which I disagreed, but we supported each other. We joined clubs at school and we eventually got old enough to look for jobs. I found one before she did, so when we went out for the weekend I would end up paying her way.

It felt good to get my own paycheck, and to pay for things myself. Danielle and her grandmother came to visit me sometimes and I would hide things Danielle wanted until the next time she went to the store.

Danielle’s grandmother was a sweet and pretty woman with short black hair marked by some gray strands. She always wore white clothing that looked so nice up against her chocolate complexion.

Danielle eventually found a job at the local McDonald’s. Getting free food was wonderful. I would go to her register and put in a special request like an Oreo flurry with caramel and peanuts. All that fast food was starting to make me fat so I stopped going.

We began to lead separate lives between our jobs, extracurricular activities, and new friends. Our busy schedules divided us right before our eyes.

As high school freshmen, we tried new things. But

of about twelve girls who danced to a routine we learned two days before. I never will forget the song called “Torture” with its high pitches and loud drums playing in my head as I waited to be called in.

Ms. Relf taught the routine by saying, “Brush your teeth, comb your hair,” to match how we moved the flags.

First we danced by two’s and then danced to the routine but with the flag in hand. I was nervous but I didn’t let that show. Danielle twirled her flag effortlessly.

I had practiced with a broom so many times at home that the flag felt light and the sound of it whipping the air made me go faster.

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Months went by and high school’s novelty had

worn off a bit. It became routine, as would anything that is being done everyday of the week at the same time except Mondays.

When football season started, we donned our glittery uniforms and white boots. Danielle and I renewed our friendship through performance, becoming best friends all over again. It was something about performing that made us put aside all our differences.

But after the game, we flashed phony smiles and went our separate ways.

At the homecoming dance, Danielle and I met up in the picture line. We had not been close enough to be part of the same group because we had become estranged by then.

Our conversation was random yet very natural. She told me about her new car and that it had taken three hours to set some of the crimps in her hair for the dance.

We talked about school activities, boys we liked, clothes we wanted, and that we'd all meet at T.G.I.Friday's afterward.

Over lots of laughter and boneless hot wings, I found a cute boy who bought my food. We fell in love. Danielle was eating mostly spicy hot wings with ranch sauce dripping down the sides.

That weekend would be my last with Danielle.

The dance team practiced loud and rambunctious the following Monday in the cafeteria. Antesha, a veteran of flag team, was showing us a difficult routine to which I added my own style,

Danielle walked in late, as always, throwing her Jansport book bag across the floor. "I'll be right back y'awl," she said. "I'm going to Wendy's. I'm hungry as hell."

Ms. Relf told her and four others who went that they had five minutes to drive the 1996 Buick Regal to and from Wendy's, our favorite after-school spot. Danielle always got the chicken nuggets with BBQ sauce.

It wasn't long before Antesha yelled out, "A drunk driver hit them!" I dropped to my knees when I heard Danielle's name amid all the confusion and talking. I couldn't hear anything else, and I just kept calling her. No one knew the truth, making it more unbearable.

I thought about not being able to say goodbye. I saw so many things in my mind. We were supposed to have fun that night, haunted houses, run around the neighborhood and throw a few eggs. But not this.

Later that night I went to Danielle's house and laid my head on her mother's shoulder. She told me

Danielle sped over railroad tracks, became airborne, lost control, slammed into a tree, and died on impact.

Carina, a majorette, was thrown from the car and died in the ambulance. I laid there with Ms. Morris for hours crying and feeling helpless.

My mother came as quickly as she could and she held me, too. I hollered Danielle's name and wet my entire shirt crying. I thought that if God took Danielle, he was going to take me next because I had done far more bad things than she did.

That night at the hospital, counselors were everywhere trying their hardest to help us cope. All I could see was Danielle's face and hear her high-pitched voice saying, "I'll be right back."

One of my other good friends Kelly was so lost and confused that she was calling Danielle's cell phone only to hear her voicemail message.

I didn't attend school for days, instead just sitting in my room and watching. It was a recurring bad day dream. I wasn't hungry and eventually turned my phone off. Nothing could make me feel better.

My mom tried to console me with my favorite meal of fried chicken with macaroni and cheese. The thought of eating made me sick because I was a nervous wreck so the meal sat untouched on my dresser.

After a week of getting rest and avoiding everyone but my immediate family, I went to visit the site of the accident. The ride to the street was so quiet. No radio, not a sound. I could hear the quiet rain drops against my window. My eyes began to water up almost as much as the rain outside.

The bark on the tree was burnt off, Danielle's red flagette jacket with signatures all over it was stapled to the tree. Her homecoming picture was affixed next to it. At the bottom of the tree were pictures of Danielle and me and various other pictures of us and the team at school and practice.

I couldn't cry anymore; Danielle was safe. She would have wanted me to keep dancing. At that moment, she became my inspiration to do everything.

College was the first major goal. Months went by and I started going to class, studying for tests, and getting rid of the people who were bringing me down.

During my senior year, I became focused. The dance team won battle of the bands and I led in that performance. Danielle would be so proud of me. I see her silver and red skirt flowing in the wind and her big smile waving toward her grandma.

"Who are we? PANTHERS!" I heard it ringing in my head that night at the battle.

Danielle's Minnie Mouse voice?

It had become a soothing sound.

